

## RECENT WRITINGS

BY MATT PIERARD

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*Poolside Ferns*

2016

Short stories of science fiction, humor, and romance; two poems; and two one-act plays.

## ABANDONED

Jamila Stephens ran down the beach, trailing the faded flag banner she had taken from someone's backyard. She had had her cornbread and coffee, cooked over an open fire down the beach. It was the 4th of July by her calculations, using last year's calendar -- the last one ever printed -- and moving forward a day.

Jamila had been living on the beach for eight months. She took shelter in an abandoned summer cottage through the winter and into the spring. As the weather became hotter, she spent most of her down time on the screened-in back porch, to take advantage of the sea breezes. Even at the age of twelve, she knew how to fish, so there was always something fresh to eat at the end of the day. Otherwise, there were the canned and dry goods to live on.

She had not seen another living soul since May and then that had been a bad thing. At first he'd been nice to her, treated her like a daughter, then he got drunk and raped her. She killed him in self-defense, but he left something behind that was now growing in her belly. She knew what it was but accepted its existence. Eventually it would have to come out and she read up about it because she knew she'd probably have to deliver it herself.

Jamila had been a B student in school. Paid attention, did her homework, stayed out of trouble. Got shot in the side during a drive-by, but that was to be expected. Fortunately, she'd only been grazed, though her brother Tyson didn't fare so well. Paralyzed at fifteen, he received a second-hand motorized wheelchair for Christmas, only to have it stolen from him the following February. They dumped his helpless body in an empty lot, lying for hours in the cold air til some homeless lady found him and flagged down a cop.

Now Tyson was gone, and their parents, and the thugs who made her brother's life miserable because he had quit their gang. Everybody was gone except Jamila and her rape baby. She prayed nightly that the birth would be successful and her child wouldn't up and disappear as soon as he greeted the sun.

The morning of the disappearance was cold and sunny at the same time, like heavy rain with no dark clouds. She rolled out of bed in her flannel PJs and used the toilet. Wiping sleep grains out her eyes, she walked down the hall to the kitchen. Her mother was not standing at the stove tending bacon and eggs as usual. Her father was not sitting at the dining table, reading the morning paper and grumbling about sports scores. Ty was not wheeling down the hall in his manual chair to turn on the TV. Jamila was alone for the first time in her life.

She made herself cold breakfast, cornflakes and milk, though the electricity had been off for hours and the milk was not as icy cold. This explained why the toilet water didn't refill after she flushed it, though she didn't know it at the time. She changed into her warmest clothes, as the heater was off, and tentatively went outside to try and make sense of things. All down the street, in the windows of the modest homes, cheap Christmas decorations hung. No one was walking their dog, or picking up their rolled-up newspaper in their bathrobe. A few birds chirped but that was the only living sound she heard.

Bravely, Jamila walked up and down their neighborhood street. Nothing and nobody. She continued alongside the two-lane access road up into the business district. It was like Sunday morning -- no traffic,

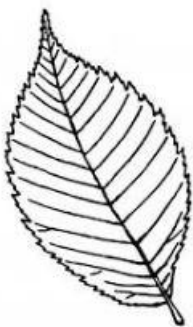
no early-morning shoppers. Tinsel garlands shaped into wreaths and candlesticks and hung on lampposts twinkled in the sunlight. When she reached the market where her mother shopped, she tried the door but it was locked. In her frustration, she picked up a rock and smashed open the glass front door -- someone had not pulled the crisscross gate across it for the evening -- and unlocked it with nimble fingers. No alarm went off but she cautiously stepped inside.

Rows of canned and boxed food stood like silent sentinels. An aisle of seasonal decorations added a touch of color. The lights were off in the cold-cases, and already the ice cream was beginning to drip down the corners of its boxes. Instinctively, she filled a cart with non-perishables and rolled it back to her family's ground-floor apartment. When Christmas rolled around two weeks later, she gifted herself with a box of fancy chocolates, and a new bicycle. Then she packed up her few things and headed down to the beach. Her father had taught her how to fish and often dreamed of living down there, dreams dashed when his athletic son had been paralyzed.

In addition to her childbirth manual, Jamila kept up her education in other things. There was not much else to do when she wasn't fishing but read everything she could get her hands on. World history, science, fine art, literature, poetry, and religion. She even learned Spanish and sign language. It was weird not having electricity though. Not even batteries worked in the few gadgets she found. For light, there were candles and hurricane lamps and lamp-oil, though she learned to conserve them by going to bed before nine o'clock.

The man had stumbled upon her at 9:30 one evening in May. He was tall, white, with an unshaven face, cold blue eyes, and shaggy dirty-blond hair, maybe in his 30's. He said he'd been living off canned food for months, had never known poverty, and had never learned how to fish. She took pity on him and he returned the favor by taking advantage of her. He always seemed to be a little high on something, with accompanying wild-eyed raving about the recent past. He was lost without his smart-phone, his GPS device, and all that other stuff Jamila and her folks had never been able to afford. His people had money, lived in one of the mega-mansions down the beach and across the bay. He had shot big game in Africa, 'where your people came from' he had said, condescendingly. His father had been a politician, rich and powerful -- a lot of good that did him, the man reflected bitterly.

Jamila had pretty much blocked out the rest, even the man's admission that the men of his family had been doing this to 'colored women as far back as the Civil War'. She had dragged his body onto a loading cart she had found at a hardware store and dumped him into the bay after tying some heavy weights around his waist. It was in the morning when the sharks were most active.



## VISIBILITY

"Dry things, think about it. One at a time. Dust Bowl, desert, that phony fog they use at rock concerts, beans in a plastic bag, soup mix with those creepy dehydrated vegetable pieces --"

"Wet things. Strawberries and watermelon. Ocean waves. Rain. Me when you're on the phone talking to me."

"Whoa, hold on there, girl," Jim said, with genuine surprise. Then, tentatively, "You -- you mean like now?"

Carrie uttered something like a yawn and a gurgle into the mouthpiece.

"What do you think, Jimbo?"

"I'll be right over."

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There was candlelight and some sort of flower and spice scent in the air. Black lace slip and crisp blue boxers dancing to Sinatra. Then warm skin on skin on cool, clean sheets, and then her wetness and his heat atop, then within, then below. Short, sharp shocks and breaths to catch. Silence and sleep.

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The morning sky was blue for miles into the Gulf of Mexico. Carrie stood at her white stone balcony in a flimsy, black silk nightgown, the sea wind making it flutter around her bare skin beneath. She sipped steamy rose hip and lemon tea out of a pyrex measuring cup, the only clean one available in the kitchen that morning.

Inside, Jim lay amongst tangle sheets, breathing deeply. He'd left his socks on and they were now bunched down loosely around his ankles. His boxers bared an expanse of pale, hairless buttocks. Carrie found it amusing as she pulled on a pair of panties and returned to the lanai. Jasmine, her six-year-old Siamese cat, was curled up in the corner of Carrie's natural rattan loveseat, purring.

Then it happened. Jim had quietly risen and was stepping over the threshold to greet his lover with a morning kiss, when he suddenly belched. Not just any little burp, but one that woke the dead, causing Jas to leap up upon the balcony and run, knocking the cup out of Carrie's hand. It plummeted five stories to shatter on the concrete walkway as Jas ran back into the apartment. Her strangled yowl a few seconds later broke the couple's shocked stance, mouths agape, into shared laughter.

Carrie swung back around and muttered, "Good God, Jimmy, what did you eat last night -- besides the obvious."

"Don't be crude, babe," Jim drawled, embracing her and nuzzling her neck.

"Oh man, that feels good," she said, as his hands reached her breasts.

Carrie was a star, a pop singer with several gold and platinum discs to her credit. Yet whenever she came home to get her head straight, she'd always call on Jim, her first and favorite. She'd been on tour for six months when vocal cord pain had begun to set in, forcing her to cancel her last few dates.

Fifteen years ago, she met Jim in college. She was studying music and he was a business major, which he'd since parlayed into senior analyst for a major accounting firm in Tampa. They split up after three years when her career took her to Los Angeles.

"I didn't want to become your groupie," he'd tell her later on, "Mr. Carrie Watts, that sort of thing."

Soon she was billed as Sister Carrie, less about Dreiser than King, a sort of Goth Madonna who pissed off televangelists and was adored by a million teenaged girls. All this from a former jock from St Pete Beach who used to wake up at dawn to take a jog down by the shoreline before the snowbirds showed up. Her onstage getups, variations on sexy nuns, were emulated by her fans, much to the delight of their parents.

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After sex, the couple showered, and as Jim rustled up some breakfast, Carrie took it upon herself to retrieve the broken cup. Unlike many of her peers, she had no entourage on vacation, to do the little things. On tour, she brought only her personal assistant, Linda Valdez; her manager, Tim Carlsen; and a bodyguard, usually female. She pulled on a t-shirt, warm-up jacket, jeans, and sneakers and took the elevator downstairs. The condo was private and upscale with good security despite its beachfront locale. She could've asked the manager to clean up the mess, but she hated to put anyone out.

"Mornin', Miss Watts," said Stu Wilson, the guard on duty in the lobby, tipping his hat. He was a middle-aged black man with a muscular build who had worked for the condominium for twenty-three years.

"Mornin' Stu, how's it goin'?"

"No problems from my end, Miss -- Thank the Lord," he intoned comically.

Carrie chuckled and went out the back door. She found that the cup had only broken into a few chunks and splinters, one piece with handle still intact, which she pocketed for some reason. The rest she swept up with a little hand-whisk and shovel she'd brought down from her kitchen. As she dumped the rest of the pieces into a nearby wastebasket, a voice said,

"Well ain't that a pretty picture -- pop star scoops poop."

The bars on the retaining wall only enhanced the man's appearance. He was shaggy in baggy street clothes, a blond guy her age with a beige front tooth.

"It's not poop," Carrie said evenly. She was scared but refused to show it.

"I know, I saw it fall. I'se just messin' wit you. Who's the guy with his hands on you titties?"

Carrie felt a shiver up her back.

"What's -your- name, mister?" Stu said, suddenly striding out the door, making Carrie jump.

She scooted inside instinctively, her mouth dry of spit, and ran to the elevator. Upstairs, she opened her door with jangling keys. Jim sat on the sofa, sharing his scrambled eggs with Jas.

"Car' honey, are you alright? You're sweating."

He got up and went to her.

"I don't know. There was this bum down there... watching us. Stu's talking to him now. God, he really scared me."

Jim held her close and murmured, "And you survived West Bay High." It was one of their private jokes, like the word-association game in last night's phone call. West Bay High was a sort of rite of passage for most white Tampa kids, a notorious inner-city disaster no Sir ever found love in.

"Goddamn forced busing," Carrie muttered, ruefully. She pulled apart from Jim and ate a forkful of his eggs.

"This guy looked so familiar, someone local. Omigod!"

"What, or should that be 'who'?" Jim sat back down, shoosing Jasmine away from his plate.

Carrie sat next to him, picking up her cat and stroking her fur.

"Dennis Turner... remember him?"

"That snotty kid who had the community radio show? Thought he was hot shit and always had a bunch of younger kids around him?"

"It was him, I'm sure of it. That damn gold tooth..."

"Surprise he hasn't hocked it for drug money by now. God he was arrogant."

"Remember how he snubbed Eric White after he fell ill?"

"They had been friends at USF, and Dennis had played the demo tapes for Someone Else's Train, Eric's group. He was all for him... until Eric came out of the closet."

"Man, he was good," Carrie said sadly. Eric White had died of AIDS shortly after his first indie album was released.

"Yeah," Jim said, putting his arm around Carrie's shoulder, comfortingly. "But this guy, Dennis, how did he manage to find us?"

"I didn't stick around to find out," Carrie said. She dialed downstairs from her cell. "Hello Stu? This is Carrie Watts. What happened with that man?"

"He got away, Miss. I called the police, they'll be here shortly."

"Oh Stu, you didn't have to--"

"I'm sorry, Miss Watts. It's Twin Palms' policy, especially in this day and age."

Carrie sighed. "Yes, I guess I see your point. Send them up when they need me then."

"Yes, Miss Watts."

"Oh, and Stu -- thank you for being there."

"Yes, Miss. It's my pleasure."

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The police came and went in about an hour's time. They checked Jim's credentials, talked to each separately about the incident, and clued the couple in a little to Dennis Turner's recent 'lifestyle'.

"Geez," Jim said, awed, after they'd left. "How the not-so-mighty have fallen. 'Known drug dealer', 'lewd and lascivious behavior', 'drunk and disorderly' --- what a loser!"

"But why now? I've had this place for five years and never saw him before."

"Prison maybe. They weren't too clear on that aspect. Relocation?"

"I hope he did hard time, selling dope to kids, exposing himself to them..."

Jim looked at her shrewdly.

"I seem to recall an incident involving your boobage on display in concert, darlin'" he said, grinning.

"It was a gust of wind!" she said sharply, blushing unexpectedly. "Isle of Wight in summer is not very forgiving."

"And how about those special brownies you brought along on our trip to Dizzyworld? Accent on trip---"

Carrie was standing in front of the balcony on the condo-length lanai. Her eyes widened with the memory.

"My God, I'd forgotten that! Wendy insisted, even bought me the bag. 'No use seeing that place straight -- if the boredom doesn't get you, the prices -will-!' Man, she was right about -that-. Whatever happened to her anyway?"

"Religion, I think. I saw her cashiering at Unix two-three years ago. Big cross at her throat, flinching at the pack of rubbers she had to sweep through, that judgemental look --"

"Oh yuck, don't--"

It was a pinging sound that rang out twice. Carrie screamed at the second one. Jim looked at her left arm, horrified at the blood that was spurting out. Carrie fell to her knees, shrieking in pain. Jim dove towards her, whipping around her back to see if she'd been hit elsewhere. No, only her upper arm where the exit wound was clearly visible on her bare skin. Jim scooped her up and carried her deeper into the apartment, laying her on the sofa, then called 911. A good thing because there was no one left in the lobby.

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Carrie awoke to birdsong and a slight chill in the air. Her left arm felt numb. She opened her eyes to find it bound in gauze with a button of dried blood at it's center. The bullet had passed through the meat of her upper arm, just grazing the bone.

She looked around the room. It was wide-open and rustic with a small kitchen, dining area, fireplace and living room visible. The walls were rough-hewn logs held together with white grout. A framed poster of old Tampa Bay hung over the fireplace, and one of Janis Joplin in her famous live pose above a stereo setup. Beside her in bed was Jim, his warm, shirted back to her.

"Jim," she started, "Jimmy, I'm cold," she said with an unexpected whimper, nudging him with her free elbow.

He stirred and rolled over.

"Hmmm?"

He opened his eyes and rolled again to his side, facing her, and burping a little in the process.

"What -is- this effect I have on you?" she said, wrinkling her nose.

"Sorry. I'm older now, Car'. My dad used to do this in the morning. More importantly, how are you feeling?"

"Arm still hurts--"

"Here," he said, reaching gently over her for a bottle of pain pills and a bottle of water. "Ah, the fire's gone out." As she took her meds, she saw that he wore a faded Ramones t-shirt and his patented blue boxers as he went over to the fireplace. A few minutes later, the one-room cabin began to warm up a bit. As Jim went into the john to do his business, she got up and walked over to the loveseat before the fire and wrapped herself in the stadium blanket lying across its back. When he came out to start the coffee, she entered the bathroom, glancing at her somewhat haggard expression. After the ER and the cops, Jim had gone back to her condo and packed a few things, farming the cat out to a neighbor. He then drove Carrie out here. Across the road sat a cruiser and two cops as a precaution.



"Where is this again," Carrie asked, now a bit high and feeling no pain.

"My fishing cabin, down south of the city," he answered, bringing over a cup of coffee and a plate of buttered toast.

She wasn't hungry but ate a piece anyway. The coffee was black and flavorful.

"I'm going to miss Stu," she said wistfully, leaning back against Jim's shoulder.

Someone, probably Turner, had shot Stu Wilson dead in the lobby before he'd had a chance to return fire. Then the gunman had run onto the beach and shot at Carrie. Only one witness came forth but he didn't have his glasses on at the time, he'd said. The shooter looked male, tall, blond, in blue pants and a grubby white t-shirt. The witness, a retired businessman named Sam Belanti, lived one floor up from Carrie. At any rate, Turner had escaped.

"I think he's made his statement, or whatever," Jim said, "Turner, I mean. He's probably halfway up to Georgia by now."

"Oh, that's reassuring. Some guy, some has-been I used to kinda know wants me dead and nobody knows where he is. Marvelous."

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One thing to love about Southern California is its resemblance to South Florida climate. Periwinkles, aloe, and kalanchoe thrived in both states, so Carrie always felt right at home in her garden. In the week that she had been back, she spent all her free time here. Also in that week, Dennis Turner had been caught and was sitting in a St. Pete jail-cell. They had found his gun in the mangroves near Twin Palms and he'd confessed to killing Stuart Wilson and shooting at Carrie. Jealous at her success and unrequitedly in love with her, the usual garbage.

With her connections, she had paid for Stu Wilson's funeral arrangements, even got gospel star Zona Gayle to sing at the ceremony, but couldn't bring herself to attend.

She did, however, change her look and dropped the onstage antics. Gone were the blasphemous trappings and taunting lyrics. She lost a few fans but gained some respect from new ones. Jim was in her life full-time now, though they had no plans to marry. She wasn't going to let anybody allay her freedom.



## FLORA

Sky: blue  
Spate of clouds  
like bolls and motes of cotton  
Raintree, oak, crape myrtle, yew  
the line of flora--  
arrowleaf and schefflera too--  
down to the pool.

The pool:  
drought-receded,  
assisted by the hidden leak,  
Rough walls stained with  
algae and rust  
slowly, slowly  
crumbles into wet dust

## BLEAKHOUSE

In the heat of the evening  
the grimy white fan revolves,  
flapping the cover of a paperback Dickens  
lying on the nightstand

In the heat of the evening  
the cat lies asprawl on her scratchpad  
her fur indescribably soft to the touch

The day having been overcast with clouds  
then burst into thunder and an hour of rain,  
the booming continuing as it drifted away  
But I dozed on, sweaty bare legs sliding together

The cat leaps upon the table to lap up water  
from a white crockery bowl  
She licks herself from paws to tail, then  
sits on the edge to scratch and sit in wait.

## SUDDEN STORM

The branches of trees --  
oak, rain, mulberry, palm --  
flung about wetly  
by the wind

Cold air flowing in through  
open bedroom windows, as  
broken branches  
thump the roof

Rain alone pours  
steadily now,  
the thunder distant,  
the wind died down

7/21/17 4:30 PM

*(Due to this storm, a palm tree broke at its base  
and fell across the driveway.)*

## COLD AUGUST NOON

The wetness of the day  
and the persistence of the green  
--every shade of it--  
brightened against the  
slate-blue sky  
of a looming storm

The wind rises  
--false promises--  
awaiting the deluge  
that fails to come



# CHOKE

1

"Three people in one week, three awful people. The town gossip, a pedophile preacher, and his complicit wife. That was what killed this town, even before *they* were done in."

Audrey Coniston sat at the dining table of her one-bedroom apartment in the valley town of Kingston, sipping coffee and munching home-made ginger snaps. This town was not the one she was referring to, but the mountain village of Ericson a mile away. Mrs. Coniston is a recent widow. She and her husband Timothy were residents of Ericson for about five years when the murders happened. Up until then it had been their ideal retirement village, in a cozy, rustic cottage on a two-lane road that snaked up hills covered by pine trees. The town doctor, Karl Ericson, was a direct descendant of the town's founders; he lived with his husband, Ty Fuller, in his grandfather's cabin near the summit of the mountain.

"We were all professional people at one time," Audrey continued. "I was a schoolteacher, Tim was a salesman of farming equipment; others had been in law, medicine, and education. One had even been a popular film actress in the 1960's, before they got so dirty."

That would be Debbie Carrington, a teen star of hot rod and surfing epics who also had a couple of top 40 singles to her credit. A car accident in 1968 had disfigured her, thus ending a fairly successful career. She retreated into the drug culture until an intervention at that First Lady's clinic, got religion, and married a respected preacher. This was not the couple who were slain, however, though the men knew each other professionally.

"Ericson was initially built as a resort during the 1920's. There were only a half-dozen cabins then, as well as a popular bar and grill with this beautiful view of the valley -- that's the other side of the mountain, the part that's a national park. Tim and I would go there occasionally -- it was the village's main source of income, especially with hikers and campers -- for a nosh and a movie. Ty Fuller, who ran the place, showed films on weekend evenings on a big-screen back of the bar, older pictures in the public domain. Carole Lombard, Barbara Stanwyck, silent comedies, and some film noir classics. It was a pleasant crowd -- they didn't sell hard liquor, just beer and wine."

Audrey sighs with the memory. She is in her mid-70's, a grandmother of two. She wears her white, naturally-wavy hair down to her shoulders, her blue eyes slightly red-rimmed from worry.

"The killer has yet to be caught. All of us were suspects, I suppose, at the time. Twenty-three people, most of us retirees -- even Doc Ericson, who's in his fifties. There had been some bad blood between him and Preacher Donaldson. Considering his predilection, the preacher made many enemies. Supposedly, he had been cured but my granddaughter begs to differ."

"Always looking at me," Susan Peller says, sitting across from her grandma, nursing her own cup of joe. She shivers with the memory, "We would visit Nana and Gramps, my parents and my kid brother, Timmy, and this guy, this 'preacher' person would like instantly veer in on me in public places. I was fourteen at the time, and it's not like I dressed provocatively or anything. Loose-fit blue jeans, untucked flannel shirt of my dad's, that sort of thing."

"You're a pretty girl," Audrey points out, gently patting her granddaughter's hand. The girl blushes and continues.

"Anyway, Doctor Ericson sort of came to my rescue one day. It was that 4th of July party up at the bar and grill. I was wearing cutoffs and a sleeveless blouse because it was hotter than usual. The jukebox was playing all this corny stuff like Elvis and the Supremes --"

"Not corny at all, my dear," Audrey interjects, twisting her shoulders back and forth for a moment, "That's classic dance music!"

"--- and we're all dancing to it, me and Timmy, and a couple of other visiting grandkids. Then this guy, the preacher, cuts in and tries to dance with us, first with another girl, then me. I could smell booze on his breath. Doc comes barreling through all of a sudden and stands between me and the preacher. They have words, some pretty crude. The preacher stumbles away, mumbling hellfire and damnation..."

"The hypocrite," Audrey shakes her head disgustedly.

"He left me alone after that, which was a relief. After he died, I heard about his past, that Steiner girl especially."

Susan shivers again.

## 2

Tony Pellegrino climbed wearily out of the bay and fell upon the seawall with a wet plop. He did not wake up until sunrise, when a stray dog nudged him while looking for food. Tony rolled onto his side and pulled out something oval, slimy and scaley, tossing it away from him -- a fish head, which the dog eagerly chased.

Tony stood up and found that his suit had dried in the night. It was of gray linen, now terribly rumpled, and he had lost a loafer in the water when he'd been thrown from the speedboat after it had crashed into the rotting dock. He looked into the bay and found the remnants of the old wooden pilings, but the boat and his shoe had apparently floated away. He took off the other shoe, a \$20 model from Pay-Lo that was already showing signs of dilapidation from the combination of cheap glue and seawater, and tossed it into the water.

He walked along the seawall until he reached the parking lot where he had left his car. It, too, was gone. He cursed loud enough to send a flock of seabirds flying from the lot for a few seconds, before returning to scavenge for dried crusts of hot-dog buns and fish entrails. Tony continued walking barefoot down the sidewalk that led to a roadside mall of the usual bayside businesses. He stopped first at a casual clothing shop and picked up a pair of crepe-soled black canvas shoes for \$5.95 and a \$2 pair of sunglasses. As his burner phone was now uselessly waterlogged, he next stepped into a diner for breakfast and the use of a blessed payphone.

"Happens often enough to tourists, we decided not to go with the flow," his waitress commented about his dilemma, pointing out the old wall phone after taking his order.

Tony called for a cab after eating his egg and toast, then rode over to 119 Plaintain Ave, where Karl Ericson met him at the door of his townhouse.

"Nice threads. Are wrinkles the new black?" he quipped as they walked into the living room.

"I fell in the water, or rather I was thrown in."

"Rough crowd at that party," Karl said, more concernedly.

"No, it was my own fault. I got a little drunk and asked too many questions. When Steiner's thugs cornered me away from the yacht, I jumped into the little speedboat I'd rented to attend the party and sped off. It was darker than I'd expected and the headlight wasn't working very well... I ran into an old dock and was thrown from the boat."

"Any injuries?"

"Just some bruising I think. Haven't had a chance to look."

"I believe that some of Ty's things might fit you. Come up and change, and let me take a look at you in the process."

The younger man, who considered himself primarily heterosexual, was a little taken aback at this suggestion.

"I am a licensed physician, Mr. Pellegrino," Karl said, picking up on Tony's apprehension.

"Okay, sure, thanks," he said, following the doctor upstairs.

"You can undress in here," Karl said, indicating a guest room. He then entered the master bedroom to scrounge for clean clothes, emerging with a blue t-shirt and a pair of cargo shorts, plus a leather belt. Tony had stripped down to his boxer briefs. He had a nice physique, but nothing approaching Ty Fuller's. Karl's husband had played football until his coming out got him fired from the league.

"Don't worry, not my type," Karl smiled as he eyed Tony for any discrepancies and felt of his arms, chest, abdomen, and lower legs. "Yes, I can see some bruising below your knees and on your forearms. You can dress now. A couple of ibuprofen and perhaps an ice-pack on your shins, you should be okay. However, you may want to check in to City Hospital's ER for an x-ray to rule out any internal damage. It's up to you."

"My legs hit the edge of the boat's windshield as I flew out. I must have held my arms up to cover my face. I don't remember hitting anything hard in the water," Tony said, pulling up the shorts and belting them around his waist. The clothes were a little baggy but clean.

"Take two now," Karl said, shaking a couple of caplets out of a bottle of generic pain-killer, "And one or two tomorrow morning. You can stay here if you like."

"Thanks, I may take you up on that. Um... my car was stolen," he said, a little shamefacedly.

"Not your day. How long have you been a private investigator?"

Karl had hired the young man purely out of curiosity, as the unsolved murders had done a number on his family business.

"Just over a year. My dad owned the business before me. He had been a cop and taught me a lot. I usually do pretty well, not to brag or anything, just this case has been ...different. The Steiners are a big deal around here, you know?"

"Yes," Karl said, nodding knowingly. They went downstairs where Karl made a couple of club soda and lime drinks with lots of crushed ice. It was a refreshing change from the previous evening's liquor. Tony wasn't much of a drinker and his hangover plus the crash was jarring to him.

They sat in the airy living room, Karl on the beige microfiber sofa, Tony in a matching armchair opposite. The townhouse was situated three miles from the marina and was the main home of the doctor and Fuller. They still owned the cabin in the woods of Ericson, but the village's ghost-town atmosphere had become oppressive. After the murders, people gradually began to sell off their property and move away. The area no longer had the peaceful patina that had lured them there originally. Only the bar and grill remained open, run by a cousin of Ty's. Gone were the movie nights and the holiday parties. It was now just another stop on the gore-ghoul's roadtrip, and currently did steady business, of which Ty received a percentage.

The cabins, however, were not for rent -- particularly not those belonging to the preacher and his wife, and Nellie Turner, the town gossip. Ericson property was still owned by Karl and his family, who did not want to exploit it any further than the B&G.

3

"Nellie Turner was, to quote Mrs. Luce, a word rarely heard outside of a kennel," says Deborah Carrington with not a trace of humor.

The scar which runs across her face is only one other line in the 78-year-old's weathered visage. At that time, plastic surgery could only do so much, and Mrs. Carrington chose not to 'improve' upon it as techniques became more effective. The change in her looks was not unlike that of Montgomery Clift's -- the feminine delicacy of Debbie Mason was lost forever.

"I believe God chose to save me for a higher purpose," she had written in her memoirs, "so I carry this scar as a reminder of my past idle life." Her admittance to being DWI became a cornerstone of her subsequent life. John Carrington was not like his own contemporaries of the era, preferring a hands-on approach that emphasized frugality.

"After we married, we lived in Africa for a time, then Indonesia, but health problems inspired us to retire. I had some savings from royalties I still receive from those two singles..." she shakes her head somewhat ruefully, perhaps knowing that one had been recently revived in a popular lingerie commercial. "God -does- have a sense of humor, you know."

"Nellie, Ann Donaldson, Audrey Coniston, and I were friends, after a fashion. We prayed together -- yes, Nellie Turner was a Christian woman, despite everything. Life had just been very hard for her. Divorce,

widowhood... ungrateful children. She had a knack for only seeing the badness in people. For instance, Doctor Ericson and his... companion. Although I do not condone his lifestyle, I know in my heart that he is a good person. Lord knows, he and John went fishing together. Fishermen have a sort of brotherhood, you know, as Jesus himself followed that profession. The two sat on the town council with Timothy Coniston (a kind man whom Nellie thought weak, God rest his soul) and Nellie, who was the recording secretary. She had been an office manager in her day, I believe. Although she held her tongue during meetings, it bristled her to have to copy the words of 'a sodomite' who 'only had the job because of nepotism'."

Mrs. Carrington grimaces and sighs, as if the very words were full of poison.

"Her vitriol also had a racist tinge, I'm sorry to say," she continues, "The Doctor's companion is of color, you know, his people appear to be of a direct line to Mother Africa, their skin is so dark."

John Carrington enters the room in his motorized wheelchair. A tropical disease picked up in Indonesia has permanently crippled him. He is in his early 80's, white-haired and brown-eyed. He wears a guyabera shirt and dad jeans over his orthopedic shoes. Their apartment is austere in its furnishings. Two or three framed photos of the couple in their youth surrounded by the native peoples they worked with are the sole decoration.

Reverend Carrington is a soft-spoken man who offers little to the conversation but knowing looks and nods.

"As you know," his wife continues, "It was I who discovered Nellie's body. It was in October of that year, the weather crisp and breezy. At first I thought it was a mannequin propped up as a decoration outside of the village's general store, which Nellie ran part-time. The jack-o-lantern in her hands, the witch's costume and hat... such blasphemy!"

Nellie Turner had been strangled.

4

"I'm sorry," Ty Fuller recounted, "But it was pretty funny in a sick way. By the way, is that my shirt... and shorts?"

Ty had come home from the grocery store and the three men had helped put the items away before sitting down again, Ty opening up a cold beer.

"Yes, baby," Karl said soothingly, "Tony fell into the bay early this morning..." he related the rest of the story and then they fell into talking about the murder case.

They were a picture, the handsome, muscular, black man with his arm around the shoulders of his older white mate. At twenty-six, the yet-unmarried Tony felt a little envious.

"You know that western comedy from the 70's," Ty continued, "The satire with the old lady who curses out the black sheriff? That was Nellie Turner -- except there was never any apple pie."

"Wow..." Tony marveled, knowing full well he'd heard his own grandmother spout such language.



"I would rather not wish death on anyone," Karl put in. "Humiliation is so much more effective. Turner and Donaldson were bad people, but I think Ann Donaldson was just in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Her husband fucked little girls, remember?" Ty said with a sidelong look, swigging his beer.

"Adolescent girls, high-schoolers to be specific, but yes, a manipulative prick of the lowest order. As only Rachel Steiner can attest," Karl nodded.

The young Miss Steiner had been a runaway when she hooked up with Donaldson. He ran a youth ministry in the city aimed at street kids, boys as well as girls, but his interest was primarily in the latter. It was the 90's and young Rachel had chafed under the conservatism of her family. She was into the grunge lifestyle, which her parents detested, cutting off her hair and wearing thrift-shop chic. Rachel found solace in the soup kitchen with like-minded runners and was fascinated with the charismatic teachings of Bill Donaldson, despite her Jewish upbringing.

"Anything to further piss off her folks," said Tony, nodding his head. "Been there, done that."

"Did the doing ever include emasculation?" Ty said, now a little blitzed.

Reverend Bill Donaldson had been found on his blood-soaked marital bed nude, spread-eagled, and missing the two items he cherished most. Wife Ann was found in the doorway, dead of a massive heart attack.

5

Audrey kissed her granddaughter goodbye when her son-in-law arrived to pick her up. She closed the apartment door and washed the dishes, drying them and putting them away in the cupboard.

As a schoolteacher, she had specialized in science with a knack for preserving specimens. In her classroom had been dried forms of frogs, worms, insects, and the like, a few of which she kept framed in her apartment. Among these items were a pair of shriveled orbs that looked like hornet's nests.

"The source of all evil," she had often told Susan, "Unleashed on the earth by Pandora."

Another cherished item sat on Audrey's coffee table. It was an album of photographs, including each of her favorite science class group-shots. In the image from 1992, a smiling, short-haired redhead beams in a granny dress and combat boots. Each subject is autographed by the student, and under the girl's portrait are the words 'Rachel Steiner'.



## FRAGMENT

The wind blew the door back and forth just enough to make a dull thud, because the frame had settled so much over the years that the door no longer fit exactly in it. The window was open to air the room and let out the steam from the laundry dryer in the room next door.

Chad sat at his laptop and scanned an article from his favorite blog. He expected to find his name in it but nothing came up in the search box.

"Shit!" he muttered under his breath. Everybody had said how good he'd been in that scene.

He got up and opened the door wide, inadvertently giving egress to his cat, who ran in and leapt upon the window sill. Jake meowed and Chad meowed back. Jake meowed again and flew from sill to the back of Chad's chair, a blocky model from his parent's 50's living room which had gone through three upholsterings over the years. The current fabric was the most cat-resistant, some kind of thick, nubby material that molded the solid wooden frame. Jake trying to leap on the back of it and slide down because his claws couldn't find purchase would have made a popular video clip online. He sat with his back to the resealed Chad and whacked him in the head with his long black tail.

"Thanks a lot, pal," Chad said, now flipping through other sites to find a review that actually noticed him. It was a small part, five lines on a CBS detective drama, but they were techy words most people can't simply roll off their tongue with ease. Somnambulistic and Dodocanese were just two. Two sites, four sites... seven. Nothing.

Chad sighed and got up again. Jake meowed happily and hopped to the ground, racing to the kitchen.

"Oh what the hell," Chad said resignedly. It was a half-hour til Jake's appointed feeding time but he wasn't in the mood for talking back and forth with the cat till it knocked something over or started tugging on the internet wiring. That particular action got him swept up and tossed into the spare bedroom at least once a week. He would have to stew in there with his litterbox and waterbowl for extra hours until Chad remembered to feed him.

He was getting forgetful in his old age, and he was only 48. Tall and thin, he invariably played rarely-speaking character roles: high school teacher, county judge, attending physician. This was in prime time; in the soaps, he had actually played running characters, the height being three years on *Brightest Hope* as Julius, the friendly mailman. Julius came to a brutal end, run over by drunken vixen Grace Mezalious on her way home from a wild party.

Chad's housemate, Karlie, was out on a temp job for a week. They had known each other since college, always in each other's business. Her biggest role to date was Black Woman With Strawberry Rinse in that Adam Sandler flick about seven years ago. She'd had the delightful duty of reaming out that talentless putz after he stumbled into her dressing room at the mall. That single 2-minute clip had received more hits on UToob than Julius Gets Creamed By Mezalious ever mustered.

Karlie had long-since washed that clown-hair clean from her curls but she still got noticed on some jobs, usually from warehouse staff who would recite her final kiss-off line with relish, completely unaware

that screenwriter Sandler had cribbed the line directly from a Stephen King novel that sadly never made it on to its own movie adaptation.

Watching Jake gobble down his food, Chad got hungry himself. He opened the fridge door and pulled out a pot of last night's confetti rice, dumping the contents into a bowl with a can of herring in hot sauce and ate it with a freshly-peeled navel orange. The ever-nosy / hungry cat began to lick the leftover sauce from the can just before Chad hopped up and rinsed it and the lid off in the sink.

"Last time, it was curry remember? You can't tolerate spicy, Jakey. There was Kitty Delite all over the floor, steaming globs of it in the dead of winter, and do you remember how Karlie hollered when she stepped into some of it?"

Jake only smacked his lips, made a cat version of icky-face, and wiped it off with his licked paw.

Chad rolled his eyes. Like talking to his country cousins about global warming.

"They never learn," he muttered, popping a peg of tangy orange in his mouth.



## SF START

1

On that last day of human existence on Earth, the young marrieds drew a sigh of relief when it was all over. They sat clothed in the fields and swamps where once stood mighty cities and humble farmhouses. Towering above them, or surrounding them were piles of nude humanity, devoid of all man-made materials, men and women alike. From their mouths had been extruded all false-fillings, from their skin all tattoos, their hair all dye, and those with artificial elements like bionic legs and glass eyes were similarly bereft. They reeked of their natural body odors, all perfumes and deodorants removed. Some died from the shock, or from removed drugs, pacemakers, and other life-maintaining appliances; their lifeless bodies lay sandwiched between their breathing brothers and sisters.

And then the great Removal occurred as this mass of naked humankind was swept up into the heavens all around the world. Instantly, cruelly, the aged and infirm were evaporated into so much dust. Infants and small children also met similar fates. Only the healthy majority was deemed worthy of use and sent through wormholes to exoplanets in need of everything from slave labor and prostitution to scientific study, and even as viable livestock. Saved from this abomination were a million young couples with expectant wives. On every continent and island sat these bewildered men and women.

2

Let us focus on the inhabitants of one small American village -- seven couples, each of different ethnic and socio-economic situations. While their women live on in a sort of heightened dream state, the men experience the situation head-on. They leave their spared houses in the morning and go to work, then return in the evening. Only there is no actual work anymore, as all of the businesses have disappeared except a single mall with a grocery store, department store, barber, cafe, and so on. The women see the mall full of people who greet and serve them as usual; the men only see lighted rooms full of goods that never seem to run out. There are no actual people, only vaguely humanoid robots pushing carts, or serving as cashiers and bag-boys. The waitresses are faceless mannequins on rolling platforms who take orders and deliver them mechanically, but to the women they are delightful girls in cute uniforms eager to serve. There is no automaton barber, however, or any robot geared exclusively for men; they have to trim each other's hair best they can, and attribute any flaws to rookie barbers.

All of the women were housewives with no careers beyond wife and mother. None have 4-year college degrees, or ever worked as anything beyond fast-food cashiers, secretaries, and assistants in floral or dress-making shops. However, they are more likely to be found relaxing with a good book or listening to music, instead of watching soap operas. As they continue in their bubble, designed to ease them through their pregnancies and make childbirth less stressful, they go shopping, have friends over for get-togethers, attend church, and other such everyday occurrences. The community church is a nondescript building on one end of the mall with a couple of benches before a podium to the men; to their wives, it's a pleasantly modern chamber with rows of pews and a large crucifix above and behind the preacher. He is a kindly, middle-aged man who speaks platitudes but never rants pointed exhortations. The men see a swiveling mannequin in black that speaks robotic random passages from the Bible.

During those eight hours of idleness, the men read books from their home libraries, exercise, fish in the river that winds around what used to be town center, play cards, or have long rap sessions about their wives and the current situation. As it was a small town, several even go home to lunch with their spouses before returning to the riverside where they've set up a sort of camp in lieu of actual work. Everything is in it's primeval state; they sit in a natural clearing in the riverside woods on plastic chairs from their garages.

"It kills me how they drive over to the mall and back without noticing there's no damn road anymore!" says Mike Hamlin.

As he said this, Joe Gomez's wife Hilda sailed past in their mid-size sedan, the men hidden by trees and shrubs.

"It amazes me that we have these chairs, and these cans of soda and beer," Aaron Rodgers exclaims, holding out his can of cola.

"Everything inside the mall and our houses has some sort of magical protection to it," agreed Dwayne Carter. "There used to be a park here with a nice old fountain over... there." He pointed to the forest of oaks and maples.

"This jive is driving me batshit," cried Levon Andrews, who rose up and seemed to have a mild fit. Joe, a layman at the church, went up to calm him down and they walked off.

Eric Weinberg sighed and shook his head. The former airline co-pilot had been sick at home with a stomach flu the day of the Removal, as they called it. If he had been on the jet to Houston, God knows where he would have wound up.

Roy Williams, a mail-man, sat on a log overlooking the river, fishing quietly. His only concern was Teresa, as she was due in two weeks. He whipped his line out into the deeper part of the river and hoped for the best.

3

Hilda, Teresa, Sarah Carter, and Joanie Weinberg sat around the latter's dining room table playing a board game. If lined up in a row, they would have shown the general stages of pregnancy, with Teresa at the end. She had gained fifteen pounds, in addition to the baby weight, and was experiencing the usual aches and pains that she'd never felt before. Teresa had been on the track team in high school and when she got pregnant, was determined to be one of those fit celebrity moms; unfortunately, her hormones saw things differently. She was eating things she had always judiciously avoided, like cheesecake and ice cream, and had lessened her exercise routine considerably. She looked at Joanie and Sarah with something like envy; both had kept their figures in check and exercised daily with long walks and light weight-lifting. Hilda had always been on the plump side, so it wasn't so noticeable on her.

They had all met in a Lamaze class at the town community center, which they still attended with a half-dozen lifelike automatons. The illusion was so real to them that they felt completely at ease, while their husbands gritted their collective teeth and said nothing. The men found that if they tried to broach the subject of their actual situation, their heads would ache and their mouths felt paralyzed. They soon learned not to say anything even remotely negative in front of their wives.

"Z-y-g-o-t-e," said Sarah, placing her letter tiles on the board. "Twenty-five points, including a double on 'g'."

"R-e-g-a-l," said Hilda, utilizing Sarah's 'e'.

"I'm hungry," Teresa said suddenly, which resulted in light laughter around the table.

"You're always hungry, girl," Joanie said, rising. "Chocolate or vanilla?" she asked, opening the fridge.

"Vanilla, please," said Teresa, somewhat glumly.

Joanie brought back a bottle of thick protein shake, and a couple of oatmeal cookies.

"Thank you," Teresa said, twisting open the bottle and downing about half. "God, that's good!"

Hilda shivered. "It reminds me of baby formula, or the stuff my grandmother eats."

"I'm just trying to cut back on solid food," Teresa said, after biting into Joanie's homemade cookie.

"When this is all over, I am going to run a marathon."

\*\*\*\*\*

To Teresa, the delivery room was all soft peach glow and easy-listening music; to Roy, it was a sterile white cube attended by robots in protective clothing. It took five hours for their daughter to be born, and though nothing happened out of the norm, Roy worried about their future in this new world.

In the afternoon of the following day, Teresa was giving baby Angela her first meal as Roy sat in a nearby armchair, watching full of love. That evening, he drove his family home to their split-level ranch house and all was well.

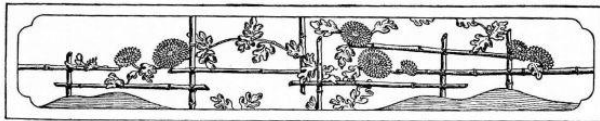
In the coming months, each of the remaining six mothers gave birth without complications. Life continued as usual, seasons passing, children growing, until seven years had passed.

Then everything changed dramatically.

4

A year after the last child was born, the men were finally able to explain their situation to their wives. They took the news with a variety of fear, disbelief, and sadness, but gradually came to accept it, if only for the health and safety of their children.

Now in third grade, the children sat in their classroom, which was actually the church building, and took their lessons from Dwayne Carter, who had been a high school science teacher in the past.



## SATIRE

Brad resignedly dug into his plate of herring steaks in hot sauce, with its side of cold green beans and rice. It had been six months since Joanna lost her job at the magazine, after she'd been sued for slander by that tech billionaire. They were living in an upstate New York trailer park to save their dwindling funds. Since she had been disowned by her kinfolk because of all the shame she'd brought to their family name, she had had to take Brad's name full time, and Joanna Wiener didn't quite have the same ring as Joanna Rothstein. The best job she'd been able to find was editing a weekly circular that specialized in yard sales and unlicensed handymen. The herring came from the dollar store that gave her a 5% discount for running their ads.

Brad, who had had a promising career in video manipulation, had given up everything to be with Joanna. There was something cute he found in the way her face would crinkle up like Ruth Bader Ginsburg when she had an orgasm. Everybody said that Joanna led him around by his dick, but he didn't care. He had picked up a job as a dishwasher in a diner down the street. The trailer fridge was filled with things the customers didn't finish, their bite marks carefully cut off, like mushy apples and day-old bread. Joanna had gotten fatter since her downfall -- not that she was ever svelte in the first place. First thing she would do when she got home from the office was to stick her nose in the refrigerator and come out with half a chocolate donut and a piece of greasy beef fajita. Most men would have been revolted, but not Brad, whose balls resided in a paper sack beneath the bed.



## BIDING TIME

"You know how, in that song, David Lee is talking about 'I don't *feel* tardy -- class dis-*missed*!'" Tommy asked Maria, anxiously.

"Yeah, yeah, I know the one," she said, reading her science text-book, and knowing what was down the pike.

"You know what he's talking about--"

"Could it be...sex? Inadequacy and ejaculation?"

Tommy leaned back with a quizzical look on his face in reaction to the unexpected retort. He had longish white-blond hair and a little fringe of fuzz on his upper lip like a line of milk in one of those ads.

"Say *what*?" he asked, his voice cracking.

"*God save me from baby-sitting adolescent boys*," Maria Gutierrez thought to herself, then replied, "Look, Tommy, I'm not here to play Dr. Ruth with you. Besides, you're thirteen; aren't you a little *early* for this sort of talk?"

"My dad and mom were sixteen when they got married, eighteen when I was born," he protested, feebly.

"Your parents were already on the verge of adulthood when they hooked up. *You* are three years younger and *you* are not mature enough to talk about things like this with a virtual stranger. Now hush up and go watch TV. *I* have an exam tomorrow."

Tommy sighed resignedly and pulled himself off the sofa. He returned to his bedroom and tuned in a sports program. It turned out to be about women's tennis, and after watching athletic blondes in short skirts bouncing back and forth across the screen, he locked his door and took matters in hand.

\*\*\*

Maria put down her textbook an hour later and yawned, stretching. She was seventeen, a little on the heavy side, and eager to graduate from high school in a few weeks. As her family didn't have the income to pay for her further education, she planned to attend community college in the fall via savings from babysitting and working at the mall. This was late May 1988, long before the internet took thousands of these crucial jobs from the economy. It was a small town in central Florida, and the

recently-built mall was the major employer of local teens. She worked first at a fruit-and-nut stand, doling out bags of the stuff to shoppers; luckily, a position opened up at the head shop down near the plus-size womens' store and she jumped on it. This was her weekend job, Friday through Sunday. The shop was dimly-lit to show off its plethora of ultraviolet-lit products, including a few that made her blush.

Her dream was to become a registered nurse, so she was to study for an A.S., then transfer (hopefully on scholarship) to a quality nursing school. She had maintained a mostly A-filled report card since middle school, her one demerit inevitably P.E.. She hated 'dressing out', having to be naked with the other girls, who looked at her flabby figure with various degrees of contempt. She had zero interest in team sports, but was willing to swim just to work off her anxiety. Fortunately, she had a sympathetic coach who encouraged this endeavor. Losing a dozen pounds in junior year certainly boosted her confidence, but there were still the inevitable challenges from some of her peers, who were obsessed with perfection.

Maria shook her head as she thought of Hillary Best, the aptly-named gymnast who mocked her most frequently. Hilly, as she was known, was on the fast-track to Olympic gold, or so she believed. Maria saw her as she was: a mean little bitch with muscles like a boy. Maria stood up and headed for the kitchen. As she sat with Tommy for the past month, his folks had allowed her some privileges in the room. Ann Compton had thoughtfully left a ham sandwich and portion of coleslaw for the girl, as well as a container of lemon sherbet in the freezer. She and her husband, Ted, liked to go line-dancing every Thursday evening, and paid the girl \$7 an hour for looking after Tommy and his toddler sister, Janey. Maria usually cleared at least \$28 a night.

Janey was thankfully fast asleep in her crib, Maria monitoring her on the plastic gadget next to the sofa. She brought the sandwich into the living room with a bottle of lemon-lime soda, and tuned in the local ten o'clock news. Meanwhile, Tommy, rested from his recent pleasure trip, watched the music video channel quietly in his room. It had been raining steadily since after 8 PM. There were the usual reports of flooding and a little wind damage. Tommy left his room to use the bathroom down the hall, then walked into the living room and started to say "Hey, is there any more of that slaw left?" when the whole house shook. At first, Maria thought it was just a huge blast of thunder, not uncommon in these parts. Windows would rattle throughout her parents' house on nights like these from the sound waves. Then the house shook again, this time with a definite swerving motion. Pictures swung askew on the walls; a vase fell off the TV set, spilling yellow silk flowers on the floor. From her room, Janey let out a wail, and Tommy went in to check on her as he was nearest her. As he brought her out, Maria screamed, looking behind the children in horror. The far end of the house was collapsing!

\*\*\*

"Run!," she cried to the boy. There was no time to wait, the lights had gone out as they headed through the front door. Instinctively, Maria took the heavy baby from the slim youth as they ran into the rain as far from the crashing sounds as they could. They stood finally a block away across the street, panting, the baby weeping. Neighbors came out of their houses because of the noise. One woman approached the children and let them into her house. She was a grandmotherly woman whose husband sat in a recliner, breathing through plastic tubing with an oxygen tank beside him.

"What's goin' on, Mother?" he asked hoarsely, bringing his slippered feet down to the floor.



"Stay put, Harold, while I tend to these children," the old lady said. She stepped down the hall to a linen closet and brought back a couple of bath towels. "Give me the babe and you two dry off," she said, handing two to the teenagers. As Maria and Tommy rubbed and wrapped themselves in warm terrycloth, the lady gently dried off Janey, whose crying subsided to a few snuffles of dazedness.

"I *knew* this would happen," the woman said sharply, but softly. "Knew it would happen eventually. You cannot cheat God and Mother Nature!"

"Helen," the old man, sitting forward, said, "*What* has happened?"

"Compton's house done slid into that ol' sinkhole," she drawled flatly.

"Sinkhole?" Maria said with awe. "You mean... this isn't the *first* time it's happened?"

"No ma'am, it is not. Happened about ten years ago. The Tedesco's place just sunk into the ground like in that horror movie with what's her name, Sissy--?"

"Spacek," Tommy said, disjointedly. Like most boys his age, he was well-versed in scary movies. His house was gone and it started in the bathroom, which he just sat in not ten minutes before. He sat down hard on the dining room chair in shock.

"I need to call their parents," Maria said suddenly, "May I use your phone?"

"Sure, go right ahead," the woman said, indicating a green wall model in the kitchen. She sat down on the sofa with Janey, talking softly to her.

Maria dialed the dance hall frantically at first, then steeled herself and dialed again. The manager found Ted Compton and put him on the phone.

"Mr. Compton, there's been a terrible accident out here. We're all okay, but, but... your *house*--"

The conversation was short. The Comptons were on their way back. Maria turned around, whey-faced, looking beseechingly at the old woman.

"Down the hall, darlin', help yourself," she said knowingly.

Maria fast-walked into the bathroom and knelt at the toilet bowl to lose her dinner.

\*\*\*

Ann and Ted arrived at the Johnston's place fifteen minutes later, their main concern now only their children. Irene Johnston carefully placed Janey in her mother's arms as Ted hugged his son. Ann leaned over and kissed Maria on the cheek, thanking her for saving her family. The Johnstons graciously allowed the Comptons to stay the night, though only the children got much sleep. The rain had stopped and the sheriff had arrived, trailed by newsmen hot for an eleven o'clock lead story. Ted later felt a mite foolish that he was dressed in countrypolitan gear while being interviewed live on camera. The insurance company was called and a man was sent out early the next morning.

The house was a complete disaster. Only the garage was still slightly intact, listing up like the hulk of a sinking ship. A thirty-foot-deep pool of septic and muddy water glistened in the morning light. Next door, another house appeared to be leaning towards the hole, its foundation fully-exposed and cracking. That family had been able to get out in time, along with as many belongings as they could carry. The Comptons lost everything except for their car and the clothes on their backs, and of course, the kids.

Maria's father had shown up shortly after his daughter had called and took her back home that evening, shunning reporters angrily. After multitudinous hugs from her family, she took a shower and went to bed. In the morning, after breakfast, she reluctantly consented to be interviewed by a couple of news reporters, her mother by her side. No, she didn't feel like a hero, she said shyly. "It just all happened so fast. I need to get to school. I have a biology test at 2 PM."

The reporters were impressed by her dedication; others spoke of shock. The school called and said she was allowed to postpone the test, so she remained inside the rest of the day. When she did return the following morning, there was a phalanx of news-people blocking her way. She only rolled her eyes and politely said she needed to get to class. Once inside, people smiled at her and her girlfriends Carla and Toni rushed up for hugs.

"*Dios mio*, Maria, you are a *celebrity*!" Carla Sanchez said excitedly.

"Yeah. Oprah should be calling any minute," Toni said, more wryly, making Maria smile for the first time in days.

"Oooh, Oprah! Yes, yes!" Carla cooed.

"I was kidding, Carly," Toni said, "Come, let's go to homeroom."

As the girls sat down at their assigned desks, the other kids stood up and applauded Maria as if on cue. She blushed furiously, inspiring the teacher -- also Maria's swim coach -- Mrs. Carter, to say, "Sit down, class. That was very nice of you."

The day proceeded as normally as possible. The principal praised Maria over the intercom in a short announcement, then moved on to more traditional subjects, particularly Senior Week. Maria moved blithely from English to History to the dreaded P.E., aided by one or both of her girlfriends. Carla was on the girl's soccer team and skipped over to join them for the day's practice. Eventually, Hillary sashayed over followed by a few of her cronies as Maria pulled on her black, one-piece swimsuit.

Maria ignored her fawning but still-stupid commentary and dove into the pool without a care. The water felt wonderful, and she essayed five laps before taking a beat. As she clung to the side of the pool, she realized that this could have been where she might have wound up had she not let instinct take over. But *this* water was crisply clean, faint with chlorine, and the only pieces of excrement being pathetic Hillary Best and her pals splashing a few yards over. She laughed out loud at the thought and swam another ten laps.

Her subsequent science test was a breeze.



## DOMESTIC PLAY

### Act 1, Scene 1

*It is a spring evening, around nine PM. A modest American apartment living-room, circa 1964. In the foreground, a beige, period-modern sofa and matching armchair sit before a low, cherry-finish coffee table strewn with magazines: Life, Time, Vogue, and National Geographic. A tall, brass floor-lamp with a round, glass, attached table sits at the juncture of sofa and chair. Upon it sits a matching crystal lighter and ashtray, meant for company as the couple doesn't smoke. To the right of the coffee table is a built-in bookcase filled with volumes in cloth and paperback, a small monaural radio, a collection of framed family photos, and a vase of blue-and-white Japanese design. To the left of the seating area is a standard-size, cherry-finish dining table with four chairs. Beyond it is the entry to a kitchen with a visible period white refrigerator. At the rear of the stage are doors leading to a master bedroom, bath, and child's bedroom; the latter door has a small butterfly plaque upon it. Separating the doors are narrow chests of drawers, also in cherry finish. Above the chests are matching prints of Japanese art. The walls are cream-white, the carpeting dark green. Behind the sofa, to the right, is the entry door of the apartment, with a coat-tree beyond. A decorative clock is placed on the wall above the dining table.*

*Standing behind the tall lamp are a man and woman, CATHY and PAUL EDMONDS. She is wearing a white blouse, a brown, knee-length skirt, and ecru hose. He is wearing black pants, a white collared shirt with the top two buttons open, a slightly-worn, goldenrod-color cardigan, and black socks. Her hair is shoulder-length and wavy; his hair is in a short brush-cut. She is a fair-skinned brunette and he a tanned blond. The couple is college-educated and in their early thirties. She works as a secretary for an accounting firm, he works for an architectural firm as a draftsman. His tan comes from a life of working outside, as opposed to leisure.*

*As the curtain rises, CATHY is standing behind the floor lamp and leaning towards the front of the stage, because PAUL has hold of her left wrist with his left hand. He is trying to lead her into their bedroom for sex.*

Cathy: "Don't Paul! You're going to wake up Jenny!"

Paul: "I don't care. I need you now!" (He continues to pull her towards the rear of the stage. Cathy breaks free and nearly knocks over the lamp in the process. She walks backward to the chair and catches her breath.)

Cathy: "Damn it, Paul. You're not the *only* one working around here!"

Paul: "Typing letters, filing, and making coffee. You call that work? Why not stay home and take care of the apartment, me, and Jenny too? *That's* work."

Cathy: "You know full well we can't afford it. Jenny is in third grade now, she doesn't need me so much."

Paul: "Yeah, well / need you. We haven't made love in weeks. I'm tired of cold showers and jacking off when that don't work."

Cathy: (sighing) "Do you *have* to use such language?" (She sits down in the chair, exhausted.)

Paul: (walking past, between chair and lamp, to sit on the sofa) "What - 'don't'?" (He smiles a little.)

Cathy: (shakes her head) "Paul, please..."

Paul: (impulsively touching her hand) "I'm just lonely, baby."

Cathy: "Can't we just hold each other, in bed?"

Paul: (sighing, leaning back, his hand now off his wife's) "Oh boy..."

The curtain falls.

## **Act 1, Scene 2**

*The curtain rises. It is morning of the following day. PAUL has clearly spent the night on the sofa. He wears white boxer shorts and a white t-shirt, the rest of his clothes draped over the armchair. CATHY emerges from their bedroom in an ankle-length yellow bathrobe, her hair disheveled from a somewhat sleepless night. She enters the kitchen and is heard preparing coffee and toast. PAUL sits up slowly, scratching himself and stretching as he yawns. He walks tiredly to the rear of the set and enters the bathroom, closing but not shutting the door. We hear faint peeing, then hand-washing sounds. He returns outside and cautiously enters the bedroom. JENNY, already dressed for school, opens her bedroom door and goes inside the bathroom. JENNY is eight, with light brown hair, in pigtails. Her costume is a denim jumper with a white, long-sleeved blouse, white ankle-socks, and maryjanes. CATHY enters the dining area and sets the table for three, then places a chromium coffeepot on a table pad. As she goes back for the food, PAUL leaves the bedroom in a brown bathrobe and knocks on the now-shut bathroom door.*

JENNY: "I'll be out in a minute."

PAUL: "Okay, honey. Daddy needs to shave, though."

*CATHY returns to the table with a plate of toast and a small bowl of cereal, the latter of which she places before the chair nearest the living-room group; also a glass of orange juice. She pours herself a cup of coffee and sits down in the chair facing the audience, pointedly ignoring her husband. The bathroom door opens and JENNY emerges.*

JENNY: "Morning Daddy."

PAUL: (kisses the top of her waiting head) "Thank you, darlin'. Go eat your breakfast." (He glances at CATHY and enters the bathroom, shutting the door. Shortly, an electric razor is heard.)

JENNY: "Oatie-O's a-*gain*?"

CATHY: "Again. Until the box is empty. *You* are the one who asked for them as I recall, missy."

JENNY: (digging in, defeatedly) "Yes, Mama."

CATHY: (takes a piece of toast, butters it, and takes a couple of bites, then sips her black coffee)

JENNY: (drinks her juice every couple of spoonfuls of cereal; she pauses) "Are you and Daddy okay, Mama?"

CATHY: "Just grownup stuff, darlin'." (she takes another bite of toast and places two pieces on her husband's plate.)

PAUL: (opens the bathroom door. He has a dark blue tie on and is holding his robe over his left arm. He enters the bedroom briefly to hang it on the back of the door, then walks over to the dining table. He sits, back to the audience, picks up a piece of toast and butters it.) "Thank you, honey." (he says, to be civil in front of their daughter, without really looking at CATHY)

JENNY: (finishes her cereal and juice, stands up and impulsively kisses her father on the cheek.) "I love you, Daddy." (she turns and pauses to nod towards her mother, heads into her bedroom to pick up a book satchel, then walks over to the apartment door. She walks out without looking back.)

CATHY: (looks after her fondly, then at her husband. Suddenly, she reaches across the table and slaps him smartly across the face.)

The curtain drops.

### **Act 1, Scene 3**

*Ten years have passed. There is little change in the setting. A commercially-made, earth-toned patchwork quilt lies across the back of the sofa. A small Ziggy Stardust poster draped with love-beads adorns Jenny's bedroom door, which is part-way open, revealing more glam-style trappings on the bed and wall. The light from her bedroom window (the apartment is at the end of the hall) indicates early morning. There is a pale-blue suitcase in front of one of the chests of drawers. Generic period rock music is playing softly from the room. JENNY emerges in jeans, orange slingbacks, and a fluffy, day-glo-flowered blouse. She wears little makeup except black eyeliner, and her hair is cut Klute-style. Her figure is average-sized, her face attractive but not a beauty. She carries a matching blue traveling case over her right shoulder.*

JENNY: "Mom, I'm ready."

CATHY: (comes out of her bedroom, working vanishing cream into her hands. Her hair is touched with gray and she wears a beige pantsuit, brown flats, and a pair of glasses with gold-tone rims.) "About time! Your father should be here any minute."

JENNY: "Is *she* coming too?"

CATHY: "God, I hope not. Middle-aged crazy. (she shakes her head ruefully) If she's older than you, I *will* be surprised."

JENNY: "Eww, *Mom!*" (she drags out the pronoun disgustedly. She walks forward, slings her travel bag onto the sofa, and sits in the arm-chair. She flips through an issue of *Vogue*, listlessly.)

CATHY: (walks over to the dining table and sits in her usual spot. A newer-model electric coffeepot sits on the pad, accompanied by a couple of mugs. She pours herself a cup of black coffee and gazes lovingly at her daughter.) "Want a cup?"

JENNY: (not turning around, still flipping) "No, thank you. I don't want to have to pee on the plane. Suppose there's a hijacker and I can't hold it in?"

CATHY: "Oh, Jen, that is *too* much. You sound like your father."

JENNY: (mutters something unintelligible)

*(The door buzzes and CATHY walks over to open it. PAUL enters. He is noticeably older, his hair grayer than his ex-wife's, and has a bit of paunch at his waist. He wears a gray suit, pale blue dress shirt, and loosened black tie.)*

PAUL: "Are you ready, Jenny hon'?"

JENNY: (rises and slings the bag over her shoulder again) "Yes, Dad."

PAUL: (picks up the suitcase, grimaces slightly) "*Jesus*, what do you *have* in here? Your whole *Bowie* collection? (he pronounces the rocker's name "Boo-ee")"

JENNY: (rolls her eyes and sighs heavily) "*No*, Dad." (she kisses her mother on the cheek and heads on out the door)

PAUL: "Still sentimental as ever." (he pauses in front of CATHY. There is no love lost between them, but they are civil to each other.) "Are you okay with this, Cath?"

CATHY: (she touches his face, palm against his left cheek for a few seconds) "I have to be."

PAUL: (blushing a little [lighting effect maybe]) "Yes. Yes. I'll make sure she calls you from the airport."

CATHY: "Thank you."

PAUL: (hefting the suitcase, leaves)

CATHY: (returns to the table and sips her coffee)

The curtain falls.

#### **Act 1, Scene 4**

Present day. CATHY, now in her late 70's, sits at the dining table with a cup of coffee. Her hair is grayish-white. She wears a blue jersey, lavender stretch pants, and black orthopedic oxfords. The frames to her glasses are now tortoiseshell. The bookcase contents, two dining chairs, matched Japanese prints, clock, and the pair of chests are gone. The living-room furniture is covered with padded mover's cloth. The door to JENNY's old bedroom is bare. A twentyish girl in jeans and a sweatshirt, resembling JENNY, enters the apartment door. This is JENNY's daughter, INA. She is alternately gazing at a smartphone and glancing up at CATHY.

INA: "Are you ready, Grandma?"

CATHY: "Yes, just about. Sixty years, just about that."

INA: "What say, Grandma?"

CATHY: "Nothing important, or as important as whatever you're wearing your eyes out on that damn gadget."

INA: (looks up sharply, starts to say something, shrugs, and returns to her phone-gazing)

JENNY: (*enters, rolls her eyes at her daughter, and passes her to stand before her mother at what used to be her father's chair. She's about sixty now, her hair gray and cut short. Same figure, in gray jeans and a pink jersey.*) "Ready, Mom?"

CATHY: (looking up at her a moment) "Yes, dear." (She rises, then pauses.) "That was your father's place, God rest his soul."

JENNY: (nods, and gently picks up the chair) "Ina, put that damn thing away and pick up your Grandma's chair."

(*As INA sullenly does as she's told, the two older women share a bemused look. INA leaves first, followed by JENNY. CATHY takes up the rear, turns, and takes a long look at her former apartment, wipes away a tear, and closes the door behind her.*)

The curtain falls.

THE END.



# Summer's End, A Play

by Matt Pierard

2017

Cast (can be gender-non-specific, but written play characters are heterosexual)

CHRIS, late 20's

LEE, late 20's

COUPLE, mid-40's

CROWD, 5 or 6 young people in teens / 20's

YOUTH, 18

TEEN, 16

## Act 1, Scene 1

Scene: a beach, sand in the foreground, scrim behind showing pale blue sky, thin white clouds, low dunes, and a one-story beach cottage with solar paneled roof, 150 feet back in perspective. In the foreground are two beach chairs in front of a large umbrella tilted back on it's side; folded on the chairs are beach towels. Between the chairs is a cooler. A recording of tidal waves is playing under the action. A large beach-ball lands on the sand, followed by two people -- CHRIS and LEE -- in their 20's, in swimsuits. They towel themselves dry and sit on the chairs; the bottoms of their feet should be clean, as if they've just been in the ocean.

LEE: Oooh, that felt good!

CHRIS: Yeah. (lifts cooler lid) You want a beer or a soda?

LEE: I'll take a soda, orange if there's any left.

Chris: (fishing around in the cooler) Here ya go. (dips in again to pull out bottle of beer)

LEE: Thanks.

(They open the bottles and sip, happily.)

CHRIS: Going to miss the end of summer.

LEE: Yes, it's been fun. (Impulsively, she kisses his cheek; he pulls her face to his and they kiss on the mouth for a moment, gently not deeply; they lean back, sated.)

CHRIS: Ooooh, that felt good!

LEE: (Laughing, playfully smacks his cheek with the back of her hand) Smart ass!

CHRIS: (Smiles, swigs beer.)

(In the background, another COUPLE talk heatedly, gradually getting louder as they walk on stage, arguing; they are older, in their 40's)

HE: I -know-, okay? Would you shut up already?!

SHE: (softly, noticing LEE & CHRIS) Keep your voice down.

HE: Don't tell me to keep my voice-- (sees younger couple) Oh, sorry.

CHRIS: No problem.

SHE: Good afternoon.

LEE: (cheerily) 'Afternoon!

(COUPLE walk offstage where the argument resumes)

CHRIS: Geez, I hope we're not like -that- in twenty years.

LEE: No kidding!

(They hold hands)



Curtain falls.

## **Act 1, Scene 2**

Scene: Evening, interior of beach cottage. Background scrim is of a kitchen, and a window with view of sand and sky, and a few scattered cottages. There is a slot 'in' the sink with a tote behind the scrim to catch dishes. In the foreground, stage left, is a table and two chairs; stage right, a sofa with faded aqua-color cushions, and a matching coffee table. The furniture is all white-painted rattan. Above is a softly-whirring fan with a couple of lights illuminating table and sofa. Scrim stage left has a door leading to back yard; door on scrim stage right to bedroom & bath. CHRIS and LEE, in casual summer-wear of t-shirts, shorts, and sandals, sit opposite each other eating dinner.

LEE: (dropping fork and pushing plate away) I can't eat any more. I mean, what is the point?

CHRIS: (continuing to eat, observing her)

LEE: How can you have an appetite? (she rises and looks at him)

CHRIS: (puts fork down) I'm hungry. It was just a bunch of bullshit saber-rattling, that's all. You -know-how he is.

LEE: (sighs, takes dish back to kitchen and slides it through slot where it clatters in the box behind the scrim) I never -knew- you were so cold-blooded!

CHRIS: (sighs, rises and goes to her) Honey...

LEE: (back to him, shrugging his hands from her shoulders) No.

CHRIS: (backs off) Look: we're safer here than we would be in the city. We have solar power, bottled water, a cache of non-perishables for hurricane season--

LEE: (shrieking suddenly) Stop it! (she runs into bedroom and we hear the door slam)

CHRIS: (shrugs and sits back down, finishing his dinner, muttering between bites) The power of propaganda...

Curtain falls.

## **Act 1, Scene 3**

Scene: same set, 3 AM, lights on dim. CHRIS dozes on the sofa with his bare feet propped up on the coffee table. Suddenly, the room lights up from outside, followed by a window-rattling boom. CHRIS jumps up, pauses. Again the light and a boom, then another farther off in the distance.

CHRIS: God damn kids!

(Outside, the sound of drunken revelry)

CROWD: Victory, victory!

CHRIS: (angry, flings open back door, shouts) What the hell is going on?! (more fireworks in the distance) You! (pulls a YOUTH inside, followed by younger TEEN.)

YOUTH: A hundred million crispy critters, that's what! (he laughs, drunkenly)

TEEN: Sneak attack. Not like before, boy!

YOUTH: No warning, just blammo!!

CHRIS: (sits down at table, holding head with left hand) Jesus.

LEE: (bursting from bedroom in nightshirt; she grabs YOUTH and kisses him passionately on the mouth, then runs out the back door laughing hysterically, trailed by the amazed but eager teenager)

TEEN: (following) Another four years, for sure!!

Curtain falls.

End



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